

# PLOTS Milestone Met

By Kevin Kading

*The Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program continues to be a hit with hunters, landowners and lawmakers.*

*"In 2002, we set a goal to build 1 million acres of hunting land for public access by 2009, and we dedicated \$3.3 million to help us achieve our objective," Governor Hoen said. "Today, we have reached that goal. Within five years, we have increased our PLOTS from 160,000 acres to more than 1 million acres. That is a testament to the hard work of our Game and Fish Department, and a measure of the value our sportsmen and our landowners assign to North Dakota's vast and beautiful natural resources."*

More than 1 million acres of Private Land Open To Sportsmen will be available to North Dakota hunters this fall, marking in advance a lofty milestone established earlier this decade.

Governor Hoen set a goal for the Game and Fish Department to enroll 1 million acres of private land in its PLOTS program by 2009. To carry out this effort, the Department was authorized five new private land biologists and additional funding.

"This accomplishment wouldn't have been possible without the effort of everyone involved," said Terry Steinwand, Game and Fish Department director. "Lawmakers saw the need for a program like this and provided us with five additional positions in 2003. Private landowners are offered a diverse menu to choose from, and are willing to enroll their lands in options suitable for them. And, of course, our Private Land Initiative staff worked extremely hard to see this through."

There have been many changes and adjustments to the PLOTS program since its beginning. New programs, like Working Lands,

were developed to help the Department inch nearer its goal. Working Lands was introduced in late 2003 for producers who did not necessarily want to take acreage out of production, yet had quality wildlife habitat and were willing to allow public access. Today, nearly half of the Department's PLI acres are enrolled in Working Lands.

Over the past few years, the PLI staff has worked hard promoting PLOTS by meeting with landowners, signing agreements, and literally pounding thousands of steel posts into the ground to hang the now-familiar inverted triangular yellow signs.

"I can't say enough about North Dakota landowners," Steinwand said. "They took time out of their busy schedules to meet with our staff and look over the options presented to them. They really took to the program and showed an interest. It is a credit to them for allowing public access on their land."

While the 1 million acre goal was reached two years ahead of schedule, work still remains for the Department's PLI staff. Reaching 1 million acres was one challenge. Maintaining those acres is another.

What comes next is the reassessment of certain components of the PLOTS program, to see where improvements can be made, and to determine how the program will look in the next decade.

Program emphasis may change in certain parts of the state, while staying the same in others. In some areas of North Dakota, the number of PLOTS acres may be increased to accommodate the demand for hunting access. To do this, Department officials have requested additional funding to enroll Conservation Reserve Program lands recently renewed or extended with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

By enrolling CRP lands into the PLOTS program, the Department is banking ahead essential wildlife habitat provided by CRP. Private land biologists will also continue to work with landowners to create and enhance new habitat on lands not enrolled in CRP.

One challenge that looms for the PLOTS program is maintaining the habitat base provided by CRP. With CRP's future in the hands of politicians now writing the 2007 Farm Bill, and changing farming economics such as corn ethanol and other biofuels, the certainty of CRP in North Dakota is unknown.

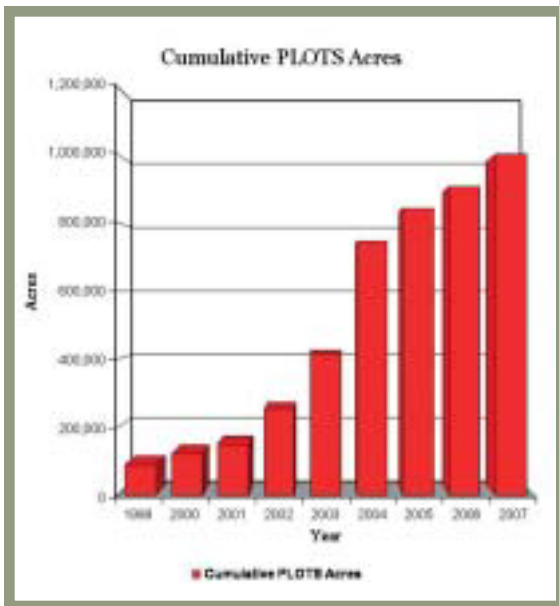
If a new Farm Bill does not secure CRP, or if there are no new CRP landowner signups, renewals or extensions, North Dakota will see a gradual

decline in the number of CRP acres. Many CRP contracts will be around for the next three to four years, but after that, things will start to look much different as contracts gradually expire and phase out over the next 15 years. With the CRP habitat base gone, wildlife populations will suffer, along with hunters and the Department's PLOTS program.

CRP not only benefits wildlife, landowners and hunters, but others as well. CRP reduces soil erosion, decreases runoff and improves

water and air quality. Department biologists are concerned that if North Dakota loses much of its CRP, pheasant, grouse, waterfowl and deer populations will decline significantly, along with nongame species such as grasshopper sparrows and bobolinks.

While CRP is just one spoke in the PLOTS wheel, it is a very significant spoke. Currently, CRP provides more than 3 million acres of wildlife habitat in North Dakota. Landowners, wildlife advocates, hunters and others concerned about the future of CRP should contact North Dakota's congressional representatives and ask them to include provisions in the 2007 Farm Bill to secure CRP



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### Private Land Initiative Acres Provided in the 2007 PLOTS Program:

Working Lands PLOTS	454,000 acres
CRP Cost-sharing PLOTS	367,000 acres
Habitat PLOTS	136,000 acres
Other PLOTS	49,000 acres
Total Public Access Available as of July 30:	1,006,000 acres

*Thousands of inverted triangular yellow signs dot North Dakota's landscape today, signaling private lands open to walking hunters.*





on the state's landscape near levels of the last decade.

The Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program continues to receive strong support from hunters, landowners and state leaders. While the 1 million acre milestone has been reached and the program remains well received, Department officials will monitor the Farm Bill, which could provide opportunities for habitat development in conjunction with the PLOTS program.

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## PLOTS Guides Available

The more than 1 million acres of Private Land Open To Sportsmen are featured in the 2007 Conservation PLOTS Guide. The guide can be found at most vendors throughout the state in early September.

Interested hunters can also view the guide, and find a list of vendors where guides are available, through the Game and Fish Department's website at [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).

The PLOTS guide features maps highlighting these walk-in areas, identified in the field by inverted triangular yellow signs, as well as remaining public lands. The guide also includes information about PLOTS and other Game and Fish Department programs, an upland game bird identification guide, and other useful information.

PLOTS guides are free, and available at county auditor offices and license vendors in the state; by walk-in at the Game and Fish Department's Bismarck office; and at district offices in Riverdale, Harvey (Lonetree), Williston, Dickinson, Jamestown and Devils Lake.

The guides are not available to mail, so hunters will have to print one out for viewing, or pick one up at a local vendor.

